

Dancing to different tunes: The challenge of cultural diversity in the doctoral candidate-supervisor relationship

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ABSTRACT

A number of aspects influencing the relationship between the doctoral candidate and the supervisor have been identified as impacting on the success of postgraduate research supervision but the influence of the cultural diversity of doctoral candidates and supervisors on this relationship has not been addressed. Australian universities attract a large percentage of international doctoral candidates and many of these candidates relocate to Australia for the duration of their candidature and have to face the challenges of settling temporarily in a foreign country and working closely with a supervisor from a different cultural background. Through a comparative case study approach, this study investigated the influence of cultural dimensions on the doctoral candidate-supervisor relationship. Qualitative data obtained through interviews with six cases from various cultural clusters were analysed and compared based on four dimensions of national culture values (Hofstede, 2001). The findings suggest that cultural diversity impacts significantly on the social environment of doctoral candidates, but there is no significant impact on the supervisory relationship. Cultural diversity is identified as a potential factor influencing the doctoral candidate-supervisor relationship and this study suggests the development of measures to ensure that cultural misunderstandings in the supervisory relationship are avoided.

Key words

Cross-cultural misunderstanding, cultural diversity, doctoral candidate-supervisor relationship, Hofstede, university culture

INTRODUCTION

The success of postgraduate research supervision is linked to the completion of research degree programs. Research indicates several aspects influencing the successful completion of postgraduate research (Latona and Browne 2001; Tennant and Roberts 2007) and a key aspect is the relationship between the doctoral candidate and the supervisor. Although a number of aspects influencing this relationship have been identified, the influence of the cultural diversity of doctoral candidates and their supervisors on this relationship has not been fully explored.

Australian universities attract a large percentage of international doctoral candidates and many of these candidates relocate to Australia for the duration of their candidature. During this period of time, the doctoral candidates, often joined by their families, have to face the challenges of settling temporarily in a foreign country and working closely with a supervisor from a different cultural background. This may have a detrimental effect on the relationship between the doctoral candidate and the supervisor as researchers have found that cross-cultural misunderstanding is a much underestimated cause of problems (Hofstede, Pedersen and Hofstede 2002).

National culture and its effect on how people think and act has been thoroughly explored across disciplines and settings (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005; Hofstede, Pedersen and Hofstede 2002; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998). Hofstede (1980) initially developed four dimensions of culture and a fifth dimension was added later (Hofstede 2001). These dimensions provide a framework for investigating the national cultures of individuals.

This exploratory study focuses on investigating the impact of national culture on the relationship of individuals involved in doctoral supervision – the candidate and the supervisor. The national cultures of these individuals are investigated according to cultural value dimensions (Hofstede 2001) that include Power Distance, Individualism, Masculinity and Uncertainty Avoidance. The aims are to gather data through a comparative case study approach about the cultural values of doctoral students of four clusters of countries (Anglo culture cluster, Southern Asia cluster, Confucian Asian cluster and Arab cluster) (Chhokar, Brodbeck and House 2007). Data is analysed to investigate the impact of

national culture on the supervisory relationship and to establish the effect of diversity among the clusters with regard to the cultural value dimensions within the social environment.

This paper commences with an overview of relevant literature, including a review of Hofstede's (2001) cultural value dimensions. This is followed by an overview of the methodology applied in the study as well as the results and conclusions about the impact of the national cultures of diverse doctoral candidates on the candidate–supervisor relationship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Various factors have been found to influence the completion of research higher degrees and in the first part of this section an overview of the most prominent factors is presented. One of these factors is related to the relationship between the doctoral candidate and the supervisor and this aspect is further explored in the second part of the section. Finally, in the third part, the focus shifts more specifically to the cultural value dimensions and its impact on the supervisory relationship.

Factors related to the completion of research higher degrees

Three broad types of factors associated with the completion of research higher degrees include (1) the institutional/environmental milieu; (2) student cohorts and characteristics; and (3) individual supervisory arrangements (Latona and Browne 2001; Tennant and Roberts 2007; van Rensburg and Danaher 2009). The institutional/environmental milieu entails issues such as the disciplinary differences between academic faculties and the vital importance of a sense of belonging to a research group or cluster. The significance of milestones during candidature also falls within this factor.

Student cohorts and characteristics include factors related to entry qualifications, mode of study (part-time or full-time), the financial situation of the candidate and the psychological make-up of the candidate (Tennant and Roberts 2007). Sheridan and Pyke (1994) find that the increased funding of doctoral students through part-time teaching assistant positions decreases the duration of candidature. Gender differences in the completion time of doctoral candidates were investigated and Seagram, Gould and Pyke (1998) report that, although it does not take women longer than men to complete their candidature, women indicate significantly lower levels of satisfaction with their supervisors and

their graduate school experiences overall. Women describe significantly less supervisor interest in their research topic and more conflict among their supervisory committee members. The success of the supervisory relationship also depends on the coping strategies and resilience of the candidate (Acker, Hill and Black 1994). Not only the coping strategies but also other psychological aspects of the candidate, such as specific moods during particular stages of the candidature, have a significant impact on the completion of candidature.

Individual supervisory arrangements are included as a third broad type of factors. This pertains to the quality of the relationship between candidate and supervisor, frequency of supervisory meetings and timeliness of feedback from supervisors (Tennant and Roberts 2007, 21). Albertyn, Kapp and Bitzer (2008) argue that personal attributes, support from supervisors and institutional support contribute to the successful completion of research higher degrees. They identify a number of factors that have an impact on successful completion - these include the level of agreement in expectations of candidates and supervisors; and the power relationship between candidate and supervisor with regard to the research study. Latona and Browne (2001) identify other factors that impact on the successful completion of higher degrees studies. These include specific protocols of supervisions that entail the scheduling of regular contact between candidate and supervisor, continuation with the original topic and supervisor, and also issues related to the relationship between candidate and supervisor (Latona and Browne 2001). A range of relationship related factors have been investigated; for example, power issues, collegiality and the prevalence of negotiated relationships (Erwee and Albion 2011; Latona and Browne 2001; van Rensburg and Danaher 2009). Although the variety of factors of the supervisory relationship has been studied extensively, there is paucity in data about the influence of diverse national cultures on the doctoral candidate-supervisor relationship.

The supervisory relationship

Various studies focus on the supervisory relationship with regard to satisfaction with aspects of supervision (Heath 2002), skill development, intellectual climate, infrastructure, thesis examination, goals and expectations, overall satisfaction (Ainley 2001) and supervisor selection (Ives and Rowley 2005). Nulty, Kiley and Meyers (2009) provide a framework for promoting excellence in supervision

by identifying organisational elements required for such excellence and presenting a method of reporting supervisory excellence. Another study finds that expanding the dualistic supervisory relationship to include communities of practices that involve the candidate, supervisor, cohorts and online communities contributes to success (Wisker, Robinson and Shacham 2007). Several studies find a strong link between satisfaction with supervision and progress of candidates with subsequent completion rates (Dann 2008; Ives and Rowley 2005; Manathunga 2005; McCormack 2004; Sinclair 2004;) and this indicates that a productive relationship between doctoral candidate and supervisor is vital to ensure success in postgraduate studies.

A major problem identified in the supervisory relationship between candidate and supervisor is communication (Buttery, Richter and Filho 2005; Watts 2008). The frequency of contact, the quality of communication and the effectiveness of communication between candidate and supervisor are of vital importance. One of the issues that impact on communication is national culture. If the candidate and the supervisor are from different cultures, cross-cultural misunderstandings may occur that can have a significant impact on understanding between the candidate and the supervisor and consequently a negative impact on doctoral completion. It is therefore necessary to explore national culture as an aspect impacting on the supervisory relationship.

Cultural dimensions

Culture is defined as ‘the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from the other...[and] includes systems of values; and values are among the building blocks of culture’ (Hofstede 2001, 25). National culture refers to groups of people in specific geographical areas who pursue the same set of rules with regard to family patterns, role differentiation, social stratification, education, socialisation, religion, political structure, legislation and architecture (Hofstede 2001, 27). To enable comparison among various nations, these variables are classified into dimensions. Initially, Hofstede’s (2001) research identified four dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism–collectivism, and masculinity–femininity. After analysis of the initial data, another dimension was added: long-term versus short-term orientation (Draguns 2007; Hofstede and Hofstede 2005). For this study, only the initial four dimensions are

explored as the fifth dimension is less relevant to the unique relationship that is investigated. The dimensions are now explored in relation to nations and applied to the supervisory relationship.

Power distance

Power distance refers to the acceptance of inequality in terms of authority, wealth, status and privilege (Hofstede 2001). High scores in power distance reflect nations with an endorsement of respect and compliance as fundamental values, without questioning the natural order of things, whereas low scoring nations adhere to egalitarianism and informality (Draguns 2007). With regard to the supervisory relationship, low power distance norms include statements such as:

“Hierarchy means an inequality of roles, established for convenience”; “Subordinates are people like me”; “Superiors are people like me”; “All should have equal rights” (Hofstede 2001, 122).

High power distance norms include statements such as:

“Hierarchy means existential inequality”; “Superiors consider subordinates as being of a different kind”; “Subordinates consider superiors as being of a different kind”; and “Powerholders are entitled to privileges” (Hofstede 2001, 122).

According to Hofstede’s (2001) study, countries with **low** power distance norms include European and Anglo culture clusters, including nations such as Great Britain, Germany, Australia, USA and South Africa. Countries with **high** power distance norms include Confucian Asia, Southern Asia and Middle East cultural clusters, including nations such as Hong Kong, Libya and Pakistan. With regard to this study, where the cultural diversity of candidates and supervisors and its impact on the supervisory relationship are investigated, it is clear that role players with different power distance norms can cause misunderstandings in this relationship.

Uncertainty avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance refers to the avoidance of unstructured situations and contexts where people require structured frameworks (Hofstede 2001). People high in uncertainty avoidance require clarity about rules and regulations and guidance to behaviour. These are found in tradition, formal procedures and ceremonies. Low uncertainty avoidance scores are applicable to people who thrive on

ambiguity, creativeness and the unknown (Draguns 2007). With regard to the supervisory relationship, low uncertainty avoidance norms include statements such as:

“Weaker superegos”; “Conflict and competition can be contained on the level of fair play and used constructively”; “More acceptance of dissent”; “Achievement determined in terms of recognition”; “There should be as few rules as possible”; and “Belief in generalists and common sense” (Hofstede 2001, 122).

High uncertainty avoidance norms include statements such as:

“Strong superegos”; “Conflict and competition can unleash aggression and should therefore be avoided”; “Strong need for consensus”; “Achievement defined in terms of security”; “Need for written rules and regulations”; and “Belief in experts and their knowledge” (Hofstede 2001, 122)

According to Hofstede’s (2001) study, countries with **low** uncertainty avoidance norms include Confucian Asia, Anglo and Sub-Saharan cultural clusters, including nations such as Hong Kong, South Africa and Australia. Countries with **high** uncertainty avoidance include Southern Asia and Middle East cultural clusters, including nations such as Pakistan and Libya. As with different power distance norms, differences in the uncertainty avoidance norm can lead to misunderstandings in the supervisory relationship.

Individualism

Individualism refers to the relationship between the individual and the collectivity – the society. Individuality is viewed as a bipolar dimension and a low score on individualism means a higher score on collectivism. Individualism represents societies in which individual achievements and aspirations are dominant and social ties are weak (Draguns 2007). Collectivistic societies view personal goals and achievements as subordinate to those of larger entities and individuals are integrated into families, society and the nation (Draguns 2007). With regard to the supervisory relationship, low individualism (collectivism) norms include statements such as:

“Identity is based in the social system”; “Emphasis on belonging to organization, membership is ideal”; “Expertise, order, duty, security provided by organization or clan”; “Value standards differ for ingroups and outgroups; particularism”; and “Emotional dependence of individual on organizations and institutions” (Hofstede 2001, 235)

Individualism norms include statements such as:

“Identity is based on the individual”; “Emphasis on individual initiative and achievement; leadership ideal”; “Autonomy, variety, pleasure, individual financial security”; “Value standards should apply to all; universalism”; and “Emotional independence of individual from organizations or institutions” (Hofstede 2001, 235).

According to Hofstede’s (2001 p. 222) study, countries with **individualism** norms include Anglo countries such as Australia and South Africa. Countries with **collectivism** norms include Southern Asia, Middle East and Confucian Asia clusters, including nations such as Pakistan, Indonesia, Hong Kong and Libya. As with different power distance norms and uncertainty avoidance norms, diversity in individualism–collectivism norms can lead to misunderstandings in the supervisory relationship.

Masculinity

Masculinity–femininity refers to the allocation of emotional roles to specific genders. Masculine norm countries clearly differentiate between male and female roles while feminine norm countries present an overlap in these roles (Draguns 2007). Hofstede (1998, 6-7) defines masculinity and femininity in society as:

“Masculinity stands for a society in which men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success; women are supposed to be more modest, tender and concerned with the quality of life. The opposite pole, Femininity, stands for a society in which both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life” (Hofstede 1991, 261-262).

With regard to the supervisory relationship, femininity norms include statements such as:

“People orientation”; “Interdependence ideal”; “Levelling: don’t try to be better than others”; “Men need not be assertive but can also take caring roles”; “Differences in sex roles should not mean differences in power”; and “Unisex and androgyny ideal” (Hofstede 2001, 294).

Masculinity norms include statements such as:

“Money and things orientation”; “Independence ideal”; “Excelling: try to be the best”; “Men should behave assertively and women should care”; “Men should dominate in all settings”; and “Machismo (ostentatious manliness) ideal” (Hofstede 2001, 294).

According to Hofstede’s (2001) study, countries following **femininity** norms include European cultural clusters, including nations such as Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands. Countries

following **masculinity** norms include Anglo, Southern Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East and Confucian Asia clusters, including nations such as South Africa, Australia, Hong Kong, Argentina, Indonesia, Pakistan and Namibia. Again, as with the previous norms, differences in the masculinity–femininity norm can lead to misunderstandings in the supervisory relationship.

After reviewing the current literature about factors impacting on the supervisory relationship and national cultural norms, the research question for this study is:

Do the national cultural norms of doctoral candidates influence the success of their relationships with their supervisors?

METHOD

A case study approach was followed in this study and data were obtained through in-depth interviews with six on-campus doctoral candidates from a large regional university in Queensland, Australia. In the selection of suitable cases for this study, the method of clustering of nations (Ashkanasy 2004) that is based on the results of the Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness (GLOBE) 61-nation study of culture and leadership (Chhokar, Brodbeck and House 2007); was applied. Ashkanasy (2004) includes three clusters in his study (Anglo, Southern Asia and Confucian Asia) and for this study additional clusters (Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa) were included to ensure that the study covers a sufficient variety of perspectives. Based on the principles of convenience sampling appropriate for exploratory studies, the following participants were selected for this study:

- From the Anglo Cluster, a participant from South Africa was selected.
- From the Middle East Cluster, a participant from Libya was selected.
- From the Southern Asia Cluster, participants were selected from Pakistan and Indonesia.
- From the Confucian Asia Cluster, a participant from China was selected.
- From the Sub-Saharan Africa Cluster, a participant from Namibia was selected.

All the participants were enrolled for at least one year in the doctoral program. Three male and three female participants were included. The supervisors of all of the participants were Australian citizens in full-time and ongoing positions at the University of Southern Queensland.

The study applied in-depth responsive interviewing of the selected doctoral candidates as means to obtain data. In-depth interviewing is an appropriate method for this study as this technique entails “an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman 1998, 9). The goal of the in-depth responsive interview is to “generate depth of understanding rather than breadth” (Rubin and Rubin 2005, 30). The interviews commenced with a general discussion about the national cultures of the participants in relation to the cultural dimensions as identified by Hofstede (2001). The participants were asked to compare their national cultural values with the cultural values of Australia. Participants were then asked to evaluate the impact that the cultural values differences may have on their particular supervisory relationship. Finally, participants were asked to identify the most significant issues related to diverse cultural values that affected their supervisory relationships.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed by the group of researchers for themes and concepts. The aim of this initial analysis was to find links with Hofstede’s (2001) cultural dimensions. The links were further analysed and related to theory to provide explanations of the results.

RESULTS

The results relating to the cultural dimensions for the participants from the clusters are now presented and this is followed by the results of other issues related to national culture as identified by the interviewees.

Power distance

Participants from the Southern Asia cluster rated the power distance of their national cultures as high. They explained that, in their countries, power is an accepted social norm that dictates inequality where

the wealthy and educated members of society rightfully enjoy privileges that are not available to everyone. As one interviewee explained:

There is a lot of respect for authority, especially for the people in the bureaucracy, and they maintain this status and they show this authority with their big offices and desks and drivers taking them where they need to go...,showing that “I am something and I have the power”...
(Pakistan interviewee)

With regard to the supervisory situation in the Southern Asia cluster, high power distance between student and supervisor exists and the supervisor is viewed as the expert providing direct and specific instructions to students. The specific instructions relate to the research topic, resources, time frames and content of the doctoral study. This authority is not questioned or challenged by the student and the student is dependent on the supervisor. For example:

The supervisor–student relationship is like a father–son relationship – the father looking after the child... if the student does not follow the advice of the supervisor, he may get a problem! The student must listen to the supervisor and do as he says. (Indonesian interviewee)

Participants from the Confucian Asia, Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa clusters indicated a differentiation between regional/traditional and urban/modern values with regard to power distance. They described the regional areas as closely related to more traditional values where power distance is high. By contrast, the urban metropolitan areas display modern and more international values where power distance is much lower. One of the participants indicated that the power distance is also linked to educational level where power distance is much higher in low educational levels than in the more developed, highly educated circles. With regard to the situation at universities, these participants explained that universities are located mostly in the urban areas and attract modern and highly developed people. In this environment, the power distance is low. One interviewee explained:

It depends on the background of the people. Those who are educated went through schooling that is based on the English system and our universities also follow this system....There is not much of a power distance in our universities; it is much like what it is here [Australia].
(Namibian interviewee)

The Anglo cluster participant rated the power distance of the general society as medium to high because of the multicultural demography of the country. For the supervisory situation, however, the power distance was rated as high in comparison to the Australian context. The interviewee described the relationship as:

...more formal than here [Australia]I don't think I would have addressed my supervisor on his first name there [South Africa] and the titles of university staff seem quite important at South African universities. (South African interviewee)

Uncertainty avoidance

Interviewees from Confucian Asia, Middle East and Southern Asia clusters generally rated their national values related to uncertainty avoidance as high. The results show that the participants from these countries perceived a low tolerance for uncertainty in their country. Interviewees indicated that, in their countries, people tend to cope better with formal structures, rules, regulations and procedures. They prefer to maintain the status quo and honour nationalism, conservatism, religious customs and rituals. With regard to the implications for the supervisory relationship in those countries, this relationship is characterised by direct and clear rules and regulations for doctoral research. For example:

When you do a PhD in Indonesia, you get a nine step plan that tells you exactly what you have to do. Every step is specific and if the student follows those nine steps – no problem, he will complete the course but if he tries to do his own thing that's when he gets into trouble. (Indonesian interviewee)

The interviewee from the Sub-Saharan Africa cluster again linked the level of uncertainty avoidance to rural/traditional and urban/modern aspects of the people. Traditional people living in the rural areas have a low tolerance for uncertainty and are therefore high on uncertainty avoidance, and traditional rituals, customs and ways of living are preferred. On the other hand, people living in the metropolitan areas are more tolerant towards the changing world and display low uncertainty avoidance. This is visible in the university context where universities are mostly in the metropolitan areas and more exposed to external changes. As the interviewee explained:

For the students coming from rural areas it is difficult to adapt to the life in city universities. They may be experiencing high levels of uncertainty avoidance. For other students being on

campus for a number of years, they learn quickly to adjust to the university life and I think they will have lower levels of uncertainty avoidance because that is just part of life for them.
(Namibian interviewee)

Because of the significant political changes that South Africans had to deal with over the last two decades, the South African interviewee from the Anglo cluster indicated a low level of uncertainty avoidance for this country. The interviewee viewed adapting to continuous changes as part of life in South Africa and indicated that the people had little control over the changes and had to accept them as part of their culture. With regard to uncertainty avoidance in South African universities, the interviewee indicated medium levels. This is due to the nature of university studies where new knowledge is continuously being sought and this creates a tolerance for changes – the interviewee was of the opinion that this is the case in most universities. On the other hand, if students choose to study in a foreign country, the differences between local and foreign cultures may impact on uncertainty avoidance. For instance:

I would say that universities are at large more unaffected by uncertainty avoidance, although there is a degree of it [uncertainty avoidance] when new students enrol for a course, especially if it is a foreign university. (South African participant)

Individualism

Interviewees from Confucian Asia, Middle East and Southern Asia clusters indicated that their national cultures were low on individualism and leaned more towards collectivism. The interviewees explained the role of the individual in their countries as part of the collectivity; within family and societal units the individual has specific roles to play and tasks to complete. Everyone works together for the betterment and advantage of these units. Sending one member of the group to university is also viewed as a measure to advance the social group – it is expected that this person achieve the educational qualification and return to the social group to provide the benefit to the group in terms of income or skills attained. Often the university fees are paid by the social group. One of the interviewees mentioned that students from a traditional background can sometimes find it difficult to adjust to the individualistic approach followed at universities; she explained:

It is just so hard to come here [university] and suddenly you are all on your own and expected to work on your own and create your own ideas about things. This is not what

Chinese do. When I started my university studies I really struggled at first to learn how to do this and felt very isolated. (Chinese interviewee)

The interviewee from the Sub-Saharan Africa cluster again noted the difference between traditional/rural people and modern/urban people. He indicated that the traditional/rural people are more collectivistic but the modern/urban people are more individualistic. He further argued that, because doctoral students already spent many years at university and completed other undergraduate and postgraduate courses at their universities that are based on the English system, they are accustomed to the individual approach followed at university and do not have difficulties with this aspect.

The South African interviewee (Anglo cluster) indicated a national culture of individualism that applies to the urban and modern society and a more collectivistic culture for rural, traditional society. He indicated that the individualistic culture also applies to the university environment in South Africa and this is similar to his experiences at Australian universities. The individualistic approach was described as:

The same principles apply here as in South African universities; if you work hard on your own you can expect certain rewards, and whatever you achieve it is testimony of the effort you put into your studies. The lecturers and supervisors are your guides to help you achieve what you set out to do but at the end it is all up to you. (South African interviewee)

Masculinity

All of the interviewees (Confucian Asia, Middle East, Southern Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa clusters) rated their national cultures as masculine except the South African interviewee from the Anglo cluster. Masculine cultures were described as societies that have specific gender role expectations where men are viewed as the family protector and responsible for providing for the financial needs of the family. The women are the carers, taking care of the children and home and being responsible for feeding and clothing the family. Interviewees explained this as:

In my country, women are expected to care for the home and the children and they have to dress like women and behave like women....Here [Australia] the women are driving the cars and they work in all jobs and they wear pants – this is not allowed in my country. (Pakistani interviewee)

Women do go out to work in my country but they do specific jobs such as teachers; they prepare food for restaurants and do the cleaning of buildings. But they must still do their jobs at home where they take care of the kids, clean the house and prepare the meals.
(Indonesian interviewee)

These interviewees viewed the situation in Australia as quite different; they perceived an integration of roles and responsibilities between men and women and classified the Australian society as 'feminine'. With regard to the situation at universities, they indicated that, at their national universities, the cultures were much less masculine and students were accustomed to females in the traditional male roles. This seems to be similar to the situation at Australian universities where, in their opinion, the culture is less masculine on the scale between masculinity and femininity.

The South African interviewee indicated that the general modern society in South Africa displays more of a feminine culture where both males and females are expected to be less assertive and less aggressive in pursuing individual goals and to take on a more nurturing role. He pointed out that the same culture is evident in the university environment in South Africa but commented that he perceived Australian universities to be much higher in femininity than South African universities. He explained:

Over here [Australia] the women seem to be self-assured and quite important in the university community and, for that matter, in the country...Queensland's female premier, Australia's female prime minister, senior female staff and Chancellor at the university....The role of the traditional male leader or manager – aggressive and competitive – has been replaced by something more feminine and nurturing and both genders are supposed to follow this approach. (South African interviewee)

Other issues

This section includes the results of the interview question: "What are the most significant issues related to cultural values that have an impact on your supervisory relationship?"

The practical implications of religion were noted as an important issue for interviewees from the Confucian Asia, Middle East and South Asia clusters. These interviewees commented that practising their religion has impact on the foods they are allowed to eat, alcohol consumption, prayer times and honouring religious holidays. The interviewees explained:

My religion does not allow the consumption of alcohol or pork and when I go out with my supervisor or fellow PhD students to celebrate for instance the acceptance of my proposal, alcohol and pork meat is often served and I feel bad to say that I can't have that. (Indonesian interviewee)

In my country we do not eat beef and when you are invited for a barbeque here the only meat that they serve is beef. It is difficult for me to refuse the food if it is offered to me and that is why I avoid all these parties that my supervisor expects me to attend. (Libyan interviewee)

Our Chinese New Year is end of January and that is when I would like to take my break and not in December when my supervisor takes his break! (Chinese interviewee)

Other issues that were mentioned that are related to religion and national customs include the way that women dress, how women greet men and the appropriateness of eye contact between a superior and a subordinate. To give an example: when the male Libyan interviewee arrived to commence the interview, the female researcher and interviewer and first-named author of this article greeted him with a handshake. Later during the interview he commented:

In my culture women never shake hands with men; it is seen as very bad taste. You should not do this if you interview other Libyan men! (Libyan interviewee)

DISCUSSION

Overall the results of the interviews show that, according to the four dimensions of national culture, the national cultural values in the social environments of the various clusters/nations do differ. The results of this study appear to be in agreement with Hofstede's (2001) findings of where specific nations fit into each of the dimensions. Interestingly, the participants from Confucian China, Southern Asia, Sub-Saharan and Middle East clusters suggest a difference between the rural/traditional and urban/modern residents of their home countries in terms of all four dimensions. The participants' perceptions of the *rural/traditional* inhabitants of their countries coincide with Hofstede's results but are in contrast to their views about the cultural dimensions of modern people living in the metropolitan area. One should take into consideration that Hofstede's original research date back to the 1970s and that the last 30 to 40 years have been characterised by high levels of urbanisation that may have impacted also on cultural values.

The results show that participants from the South Asia cluster perceive power distance as high in their countries and also in the university environment. By contrast, participants from the Confucian Asia, Middle East and Sub-Saharan clusters rate power distance as high in the rural/traditional areas and low in the metropolitan areas – the university environments are also viewed as low in power distance. The results for uncertainty avoidance and individualism appear to be similar for specific clusters. The Confucian Asia, Middle East and South Asia clusters indicate high levels of uncertainty avoidance and low levels of individualism and this also applies to the university environments. The Sub-Saharan and Anglo clusters show low levels of uncertainty avoidance and high levels of individualism. For the masculinity dimension, all clusters except for the Anglo cluster indicate high levels of masculinity.

It is clear that the degree of impact of cultural diversity and its impact on the doctoral candidate–supervisor relationship depend on the cultural cluster that the doctoral candidate originates from. This study shows that candidates from the Confucian Asia, Middle East and South Asia clusters have different national cultural values from those of candidates from the Anglo and Sub-Saharan clusters with regard to power distance, uncertainty avoidance and individualism. This can potentially have an impact on the doctoral candidate–supervisor relationship. Other factors that participants identified as having an impact are related to religion. Once again, this appears to be a factor in three clusters: Confucian Asia, Middle East and South Asia. Religions practised in these clusters include Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism. These religions have specific guidelines about lifestyles, moralities, ethics and religious laws and these influence their participation in social activities in western societies. Although religion does not appear to have a direct influence on the supervisory relationship, it has an impact on the socialisation of the doctoral candidates.

Another aspect that may have a moderating effect on the impact of diverse cultural values on the supervisory relationship is candidates' prior exposure to university cultures in their undergraduate studies. Participants in this study view the university environment as slightly different from the local society in terms of cultural values because of the international character of universities in general. The University of Southern Queensland's Learning Centre (2009) defines a "university culture" as a culture that is characterised by members seeking knowledge through critical thinking and exhaustive

inquiry; this is achieved through openness and a tolerance for different ideas, viewpoints and cultures. The university culture is characterised by active interaction, dialogue and engagement between university staff and students to create a creative and productive academic environment. The university culture advocates academic freedom that is described as: "...academics should be allowed to pursue scholarly activities without fear of reprisal and without direction from authority" (University of Southern Queensland, 2009). Because all doctoral candidates in this study achieved undergraduate degrees from universities, they have been exposed to the university culture at either local universities or universities in the Anglo cluster. When they enrolled for doctoral programs, they were accustomed to the university culture even if it differed from their national cultural values. This appears to alleviate the impact of cultural diversity on the supervisory relationship. The results of a study about cultural influence on Malay adult learners seem to agree with this finding. Ahmad and Faizah (2010) investigated cultural influence on self-directed learning (SDL) and their results show that culture does not have a strong influence on SDL. However, the results of Ahmad and Faizah's study further indicate that cultural diversity does have an impact on individuals within the *social* environment. There appears to be a difference between the cultural impact on the *social* environment and the *learning* environment (university culture).

The current study presents similar findings – a contrast between a national culture's impact on the social environment and its impact on the learning environment (supervisory relationship). Although the participants indicated cultural differences related to the cultural dimensions with regard to their home countries, they also notes that those differences are less prominent in the university environment and therefore indicate no significant impact of national culture on the supervisory relationship.

Although this study finds no significant influence of the national cultural norms of doctoral candidates on their relationships with their supervisors, the findings on cultural dimensions can help supervisors to design and undertake interventions to avoid misunderstandings related to cultural diversity. These interventions relate to supervision practice in support of students from diverse cultures and address communication, planning and empathy (Watts 2008), developing self-help groups among students from diverse cultures (Wisker, Robinson and Shacham 2007) and understanding the emotional and psychological problems related to cultural diversity (Buttery, Richter and Filho 2005).

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study does not find a strong influence of cultural diversity on the doctoral candidate—supervisor relationship despite contrasting findings with regard to the impact of cultural dimensions on the social environment of the clusters investigated. It was demonstrated through the application of Hofstede's (2001) national cultural value dimensions that doctoral candidates from various cultural clusters have different cultural perspectives about the dimensions but they share similar views about the university culture. However, even without evidence of a significant impact of national cultural diversity on the supervisory relationship, this study draws attention to cultural diversity as a potential factor influencing the doctoral candidate—supervisor relationship. The findings of the present study suggest that cultural diversity affects the social environment of individuals and may have a secondary effect on doctoral candidates' progress and successful completion, thereby highlighting the potential significance of candidates and supervisors dancing to different tunes. This should be acknowledged in supervisory practices and interventions to ensure that cultural misunderstandings between doctoral candidates and their supervisors are avoided. It may also be sensible to involve the families of foreign candidates in interventions to create a better understanding of the cultural values and expectations of the Australian culture. In the end it is a matter of understanding between doctoral candidate and supervisor, building better communication between the parties and working towards a healthy and productive relationship.

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